

2006 Mercedes CLS500
Four Door Coupe Isn't the Only Contradiction
By David Ray for www.hookedondriving.com

The CLS500 is a study in contradiction. You've certainly heard the oxymoronic ads declaring the CLS a "four door coupe." This apparently blends with phrases like "Mercedes-like orange peel paint", and "really slick German cupholder," or a great value at under \$73,000. Seriously, Mercedes builds some of the finest and best engineered cars in the world. In fact, the AMG models we've tested are at the very top of the dream-car chart here at HOD. But the CLS confounds us. The E500 is on the identical floor pan, weighs 200 lbs less, has an identical 5.9 second 0-60 time with the same engine, costs around \$6000 less than the CLS, and has a great back seat. The CLS seems to be almost a clone of the E500 in many ways, but gives up the back seat room and three miles per gallon highway (not insignificant over the long haul). It begs us to ask the question, is the CLS just a different design for design's sake? Simply put, the CLS500 "Coupe" is a different shape for the mid-sized Mercedes sedan which started out as an already outstanding car. So – if you want a sedan of Mercedes quality, and are willing to give up substantial utility to get the swoopy shape – you're the demographic for this car.



Here are some hands-on impressions of the CLS500. One either digs the style or doesn't. We think it's very cool, but don't think it belongs on a four door. The back seats photograph well, but if you're over 5' 9", you'll be kinking your neck to remain seated. The seats are excellent, supportive and of high quality construction. But the CLS has minor items and accessories that are clearly below the Mercedes standard. The window visors appear to be from a Saturn, and there are trim pieces that don't look like they'll make it as far as the basic car will. And the carpeting leaves a bit to be desired for a car in this price range. Again – we're seeing contradictions here – great infrastructure and core competencies, with skimped details. Let's shut up and take the CLS for a ride.

OK – now we get it. The CLS500 is a dream to drive. Seats firm, 339 ft lbs of torque pull hard from the 5.0 liter, 302 horsepower V8. Steering is over-boosted, but we get over that, as we're probably not they're demographic. Sure handles a parking lot nicely though. The back-to-back-bullet shape has its advantages. The .30 drag coefficient yields a deathly silent ride, only to be

disturbed by a very pleasant rumble when the V8 is called upon to do its duty. This very svelte shape creates a lovely profile, but rounded edges are much less efficient in space utilization, so the CLS finds itself to be a large car with a smallish feel inside. The driver and front passenger seats sit low and inboard from the doors. This is certainly a good thing when it comes to safety, but you won't be cruising with the windows down and elbow out of this sedan. You're pretty insulated from it all in the CLS. And the back seat, in order to get respectable measurements, also sits very low with correspondingly very high window sills – just a bit claustrophobic. We did get a chance to push the CLS through a very tight stretch of canyon driving. And it handled hard driving VERY well. The seven-speed automatic is as good as the Audi DSG, which we said was on top of our list. The shifts are super quick, and the Mercedes "Touch Shift" system adapts to driver style and that's not marketing hype. It is excellent and eliminates the longing for an SMG. While we're not fooled into thinking this is a sports car, the CLS can be driven on any public highway (at legal speeds) at a pace to satisfy any SCCA enthusiast. Turn-in is predictable, body roll is modest for a car this size, and the brakes would not fade when used hard in repeated canyon deceleration exercises.

The CLS500 truly is a contradiction in terms. A four door coupe, that is 4000 lbs but feels nimble, engineered well but has cut corners, and has a practical shape that nets less room inside and worse mileage figures than the boxy sister ship. If you have been wanting well-built, sporty mid-sized sedan, and can afford some exclusivity, the CLS may be your car. Just be sure you park an E500 right next to the CLS500 first. Study the differences, drive them both. Then, if the style makes the sale for you we totally get it – buy it for the design study it is and enjoy!